

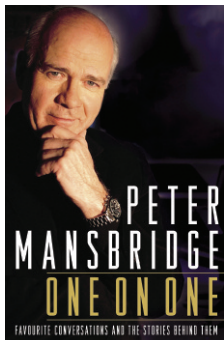
Three great reads for the holidays

Peter Mansbridge. *One on One: Favourite Conversations and the Stories behind Them*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2009.

Rex Murphy. *Canada and Other Matters of Opinion*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2009.

Margaret Wente. *You Can't Say That in Canada!* Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2009.

Review by Geoff Norquay



The inherent problem with anthologies of interviews and columns is that the passage of time may render them stale-dated irrelevancies. It's therefore a good idea for the anthologist to provide some context to remind the reader of the who, what, when, where and why of the items included. And because interviewers and columnists both operate completely in public and without a net, it's also useful for them to possess a tough skin, an absence of ego and a well-developed sense of self-deprecation.

Peter Mansbridge deals with all of these challenges in *One on One: Favourite Conversations and the Stories behind Them*. Each interview is introduced with several paragraphs of 2009 context. His introduction to the book also provides a very personal description of how he became a journalist and how the challenge of interviewing people initially filled him with dread.

He tells us how he learned the discipline of exhaustive preparation, and then caps it off with the story of how a grumpy Margaret Thatcher on her book tour bridled at nearly every question he asked, and repeatedly accused him of never having read her book. (He confides he was tempted several

times to ask her whether she had actually written it.) The interview limped to its conclusion with the following frosty exchange:

Mansbridge: Could Margaret Thatcher have served under a Margaret Thatcher?

Thatcher: I don't know. I think it's a silly question to ask.

Ouch.

The range of people captured in the Mansbridge book is wide and eclectic. There are the obvious politicians — every Canadian prime minister from Pierre Trudeau to Stephen Harper, three Israeli prime ministers, plus Bill Clinton, Hamid Karzai and Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson. There are several from the world of entertainment, including jazz pianist Diana Krall, actor Colm Feore and rock pioneer Randy Bachman, as well as a raft of sports stars, from golfers to hockey players.

The objectives of the effective interviewer are simple but complicated: to get the subject to open up and be self-revelatory, to provide the new and striking insight, to tell the untold story. Interestingly, some of the best sessions here are with non-political people.

Sir Martin Gilbert, biographer of Winston Churchill, conducts a fascinating analysis of the difference between wartime and peacetime leadership and tells how the French resistance leader Charles de Gaulle was so inept on first meeting that Churchill wrote: "General de Gaulle is our man, but he has such a poor personality and

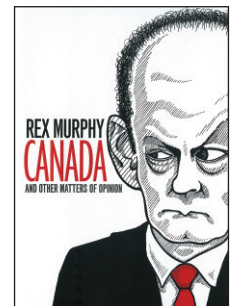
presentation I propose we use government money to get the leading PR firm to boost up his image." This must be one of the earliest leadership careers to be launched by a bit of media training!

The interview with Colm Feore is brilliant; at one point, the actor calmly describes being covered by fire retardant for a movie scene in which a wall blows up behind him as he is reading a book:

How much research is necessary for this? Very little. I showed up, said hello, collected my per diem cheque, was charming and gracious with everybody, sat there, held the book, pretended to read and tried not to burn.

Most of the Mansbridge interviews survive well the translation from video to the written word. At first reading, the session with Sidney Crosby seems pretty banal; then you realize that Crosby was 19 years old at the time of the interview and already the captain of his team, and then the simplicity and maturity of his judgment and leadership shine through.

To opine that Rex Murphy (*Canada and Other Matters of Opinion*) is a national icon is akin to arguing that rain is wet. Of the estimable Mr. Murphy — he of the thrice-



weekly visits to Canadian households: *Cross Country Checkup*, Thursday night on *The National* and the *Globe and Mail* on Saturdays — much can be said: Brobdingnagian in his literary talents, and well-read beyond all mortals save Conrad Black (well, perhaps that jury is still out), Rex Murphy is our own national pricker of pomposity, sandbagger of the stupid, paintballer of the petulant, alienator of the execrable, illuminator of the ignorant and flayer of the flatulent.

You think I mock? Consider the following from Murphy's introduction:

They who anathematize the Alberta oil sands fly locust-like in great swarms to yet one more gargantuan "world gathering" of planet-savers to natter on in first-class five-star hotel-spas about the world's "oil addiction," heedless that their venue, their flights, their meals, and the near equal swarm of the international press which is there to beam their empty jeremiads to the televisions and presses of a yawning world — all that is enabled, is made possible by, that "toxic" petroleum and the wealth that it generates, and that they so sanctimoniously deplore.

For Rex Murphy, the world is the crowded theatre where he delights in shouting "Fire," and for the simple reason that it is filled with people who take themselves far too seriously, or are too stupid to be allowed out unattended. As he suggests in his introduction:

Every day's newspaper carries stories that defy the sternest credibility, and wrench common sense from its tether...Before this great flood of inanity, self-contradiction and megalomaniacal self-righteousness, satire lies disarmed and exhausted, bleeding and in wounded retreat from a million headlines or television lead items.

Some of his best columns address the complex issue of limits to free speech and human rights, based on the follies of various provincial and federal human rights commissions and the Danish cartoon controversy: "Eventually we will

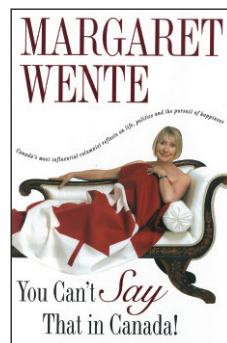
tolerate and 'inclusive' ourselves into oblivion. We will smudge or abrade every common characteristic, violate all common sense in doing so, till 'being Canadian' is little more than a vague cloud of barely formed attitudes, a mere mist of politically correct half-thoughts empty of any content."

There is much, much more in this book that deserves attention; in fact, more than justice can serve in a brief review. After all, anyone who in just over 300 pages can excoriate, blister and generally ridicule Madonna, Bono, Sir Bob Geldoff, Al Gore, Heather McCartney, Idi Amin, the Archbishop of Canterbury and that delightful Mr. Ahmadinejad deserves not only our rapt attention, but also our undying thanks. Did I forget to mention he loves Boston cream donuts?

Margaret Wente (*You Can't Say That in Canada!*) arrived at the columnist's role in a roundabout fashion. Early in her career, she moved into management

and spent several years editing *Canadian Business*, *ROB Magazine* and the *Globe and Mail* business section. Only latterly did she emerge as a columnist, and for readers, it was worth the wait. As a self-professed contrarian, like Rex Murphy, she finds her subjects in day-to-day events: "Fortunately for me, we're not likely to run out of human folly and political stupidity anytime soon. They are the world's most renewable resources."

You Can't Say That in Canada! is her second book, and it uses a number of issues she has addressed in her *Globe* columns as the jumping-off point for more detailed attention. Fans of Wente will already be aware that she comes from the liberal centre in the political spectrum, leavened by the perspectives of aging affluent boomer, passionate citizen and woman, and that she balances all of these with a light touch.



Like Rex Murphy's collection, much of this book is about challenging conventional wisdom, which is something Wente does well. The series of pieces on child rearing and the biases and failings of the education system is quite thought-provoking. She takes on the issue of boys opting out of the school system as a prelude to opting out of adulthood:

While women are busy buying condos and starting RRSPs, an alarming number of men are busy swilling beer and playing Halo 3. Known as "slacker dudes," they've become a recognizable type in a host of movies (Knocked Up, Pineapple Express and the like) that have provided Canadian actor Seth Rogan with steady work.

Her diagnosis of these phenomena is interesting — a school system that seems designed to alienate boys: "When a friend of mine gave his 12-year-old son a Swiss Army knife, the kid inadvertently went to school with it and was suspended for three days when it fell out of his pocket. Both father and son were treated like mass murderers in the making."

Other targets of political correctness include recycling, global-warming fundamentalism and carbon offsets. Her rant on the lunacy of garbology as practised in Toronto is over-the-top funny: "You can be sure that angels, if they exist, do not produce any garbage at all. Environmental purists say if we were better, we wouldn't either. The amount of garbage we produce is the precise measure of our mortal sin and error, and the more there is of it, the wickeder we are."

Every urban Canadian over the age of 50 has harboured similar thoughts while seeking to figure out the difference between black boxes, blue boxes, green boxes and X-Boxes.

What do you mean, "One of these things is not like the other"?

Never mind.

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